

# Leadership Learning with EFL and a Contemporary Motion Picture Model- *Mona Lisa Smile*

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Learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) combined with leadership lessons help students develop the confidence and curiosity required to be successful in a global community by acquiring both English communication and critical thinking skills. A class was developed called 'Lady Leaders' with just such an approach. A creative curriculum for an English Communication class used contemporary English women's magazines, examples of women leaders, and interviews with university alumni for both oral and written the discussions and presentations. Content was recorded and formatted into a 'Lady Leader Magazine' or scrapbook, reflecting students' preferences, inspirations and leadership qualities as outlined within the magazine sectional themes. Individual creativity was expressed by generating an original a magazine title with tag line (slogan), personal choices on contemporary and everyday subjects, and choosing a Lady Leader. Students' reactions to topics from lipstick to leadership were positive. This paper will discuss this class and the leadership learning as modeled in the motion picture, *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003).

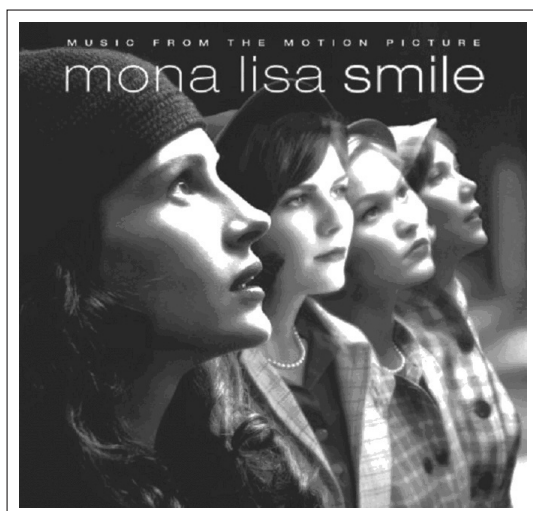
## Introduction

Compelling stories in a motion picture or in a classroom are the frames through which authentic leaders and teachers motivate others. The purpose of stories, regardless if they are about fashion or leadership achievements, is to share insights and inspire others. It is fitting this paper begin with the story to offer insight into my inspiration.

The story of how I connected the motion picture *Mona Lisa Smile* to my collegiate English class was quite an accident but once made, it seemed an appropriate metaphor to explain my aspirations for an English Communication class at a private, all women university. It happened coincidentally at a 'Hen Party'. It was the third meeting of our women-only, neighborhood, speak-English-event. All the guests bring a special

treat to eat, and we talk about our loves and lives. I was explaining how in one of my classes, to make learning English enjoyable, we discuss fashion, makeup and romance—all topics of great interest to this student population. However, inter-laced with these everyday concerns are lessons on extraordinary women as well as leadership concepts and challenges. The goal being to tilt these young women toward embracing their identity and developing their power as women leaders. At this point my friend smiled and said, "Oh, right- *Mona Lisa Smile*." I was taken aback by her precision. Having not seen this motion picture in some years, I immediately watched the motion picture and confirmed my friend's insight. *Mona Lisa Smile* does dramatize the intention for the class and quotes from the movie will be interspersed with my explanation of my pedagogic approach. First I will summarize the movie.

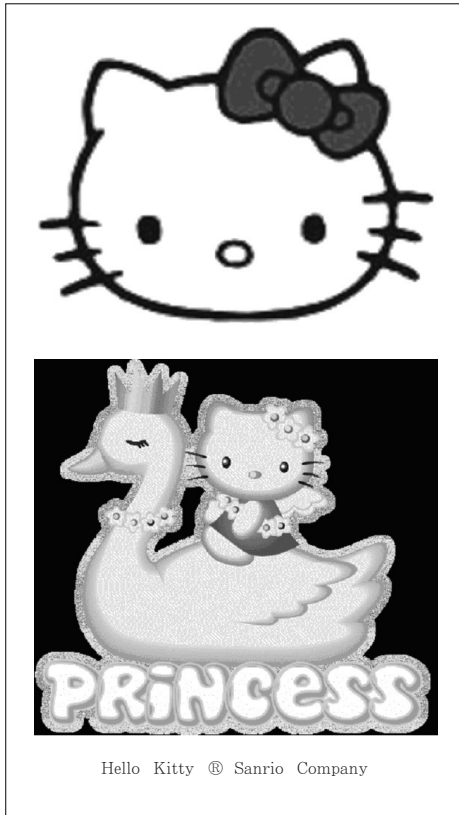
### *Mona Lisa Smile*



The story in the motion picture *Mona Lisa Smile* is one of awakening achieved with the vision and passion of a teacher. Released in 2003, this American motion picture is a loose adaptation of Muriel Spark's novel, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. Directed by Mike Newell and written by Lawrence Konner and Mark Rosenthal, the story takes place in 1953 at Wellesley College, a prestigious private women's college in Massachusetts. The college is populated by extremely bright, snobbish upper-class students whose

future is focused for a traditional life as housewives. For the most part, the students all seem to be biding their time—waiting to find the right man to marry. Enter Katherine Watson, a liberal minded teacher from Berkley California, who has accepted a teaching position in the Art History Department. Watson is a very modern woman, particularly for the 1950s, and has a passion not only for art but for her students. Watson feels her bright students are not reaching their potential and sets out to open their minds by challenging their interpretations of art. Evidence of Watson's influence is dramatized in several seminal scenes which will be referred to later in this paper including: the viewing of Soutine's 1925 painting, *Carcass of Beef*; an up close and personal view to Pollock's 1950 huge painting, *Lavender Mist*, and the students' discussion of da Vinci's painting *Mona Lisa*, for which the movie is named. Through a number of dramatic subplots the movie ends, but rather than a conclusion the viewer feels it is just the beginning. Watson's teaching is transformational, and both students and

Watson are changed. Watson empowered, follows her dream as do the students. The cast includes Julia Roberts as Katherine Watson and the Wellesley students are played by Kirsten Dunst as Betty Warren-Jones; Julia Stiles as Joan Brandwyn-Donegal; Maggie Gyllenhaal as Giselle Levy; and Ginnifer Goodwin as Connie Baker.



### The Culture of Cute

Wellesley College circa 1953, the setting of *Mona Lisa Smile*, translates to an EFL class in Japan fifty years later in a number of ways not least of which is a teacher's effort to affect young women. To understand the base-line from which transformations are desired, consider the Japanese cultural phenomenon of *kawaii* or cuteness. The world-wide popularity of the 'Hello Kitty' image is evidence this concept is powerful. In Japan it is omnipresent. As Marling (2001) comments, "...little girls are the princesses of the kingdom of Japanese cute, presided over by Sanrio's Hello Kitty sweet-as-sugar merchandise. Liza Dalby, in her 1989 study of Japanese play, asserts that the cuteness associated with such girls' toys provides a model for what women are expected to become" (p. 104). Even making allowances for the students' low level English skills, the adjective cute is a common descriptor whether talk-

ing about fashion or leaders' character features, and another example of the power of *kawaii* in Japanese culture.

Faced with the task of creating a class which would be effective and of interest to the students and myself, I choose topics which fit both profiles: lipstick and leadership. Fashion and make-up are topics relevant to their lives, and women in leadership are topics close to my heart. My challenge was to point their conscience compass just away from cute and to a place where they will begin to discover their power as women as Watson does in *Mona Lisa Smile*. I was motivated to help these talented young women gain the confidence through learning English to become the next generation leaders- whatever their profession, just as Watson in the motion picture, "...came to Wellesley because she wanted to make a difference."

### Leadership and Transformation

Researchers seldom agree on how to best define leadership, but most would agree

leaders guide, direct, motivate, and/ or inspire others. Whether a mother or the first woman Prime Minister of Japan, leadership communications consists of layers of effective speaking and writing and the use of these skills from one person to another. It is also clear the power effective communication can create a positive ethos.

The nature of transformation is like the metamorphosis observed as caterpillar changes into a butterfly. As Burns (2003) states, transformation is the, "...change in the very condition or nature of a thing, a change into another substance, a radical change in outward form or inner character, as when a frog is transforms into a prince" (p. 23). Although transformation does not prosper with directives from a prince or Machiavellian mentors, leadership plays a part. Additionally, transformation can be easily confused and even disguised by cathartic epiphanies or even a woman's kiss that launches a thousand ships. However, a universal concept of love does cultivate transformation. Palmer (2004) offers,

The people who help us grow toward true self offer unconditional love, neither judging us to be deficient nor trying to force us to change but accepting us exactly as we are and yet this unconditional love does not lead us to rest on our laurels. Instead, it surrounds us within a charged force field that makes us want to grow from the inside out. (p.43 ).

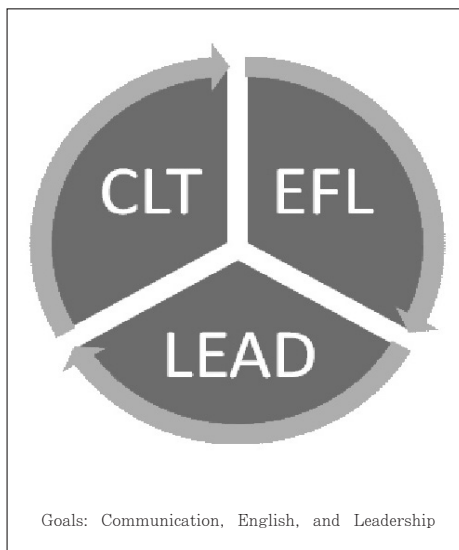
The authentic changes seen in transformation are characterized by a dynamic hierarchy of harmony, guided to steps of empowerment, collaboration and dialogue where everything flows, *panta rei*. These steps toward a better self, a better world, and a utopian state of universal consciousness are generated by self-reflection, understanding, communication with community and our actions. Transformation originates and is controlled by opening the soul's interior doors. As Palmer states, "We must invite, not command the soul to speak. We must allow, not force, ourselves to listen" (p. 87). Paradoxically, the solitary journey of transformation has an interactive nature; character is engaged in the process by the stories we hear and tell. This fundamental moment is a litmus test leading to transformational leadership, and again Palmer offers, "Every time we get in touch with the truth source we carry within, there is net moral gain for all concerned. Even if we fail to follow its guidance fully, we are nudged a bit further in that direction" (p. 45).

Transformation is the essential core through which leadership affects real changes for the greater good. This is not a manipulated good, or a good based on a construct of a given morality, or special interests goods, but the universal good to which all life must surrender. A question for centuries, Aristotle provokes us with, "Then does knowledge of this good carry great weight for our way of life and would it make us better able, like archers who have a target to aim at, to hit the right mark?" (Aristotle, EN, 1094a23). This greater good goal may appear lofty which contributes to the sparseness of its presence in leadership. This confusion separates the soul and drives those embedded self-interests. When we separate the parts from the whole,

change can happen but transformation is not supported. Fights for moral rights and wrongs delude and deflected the dynamic harmony to truth. As Carey (2005) states, "To fully understand and promote empowerment, collaboration, and dialogue within organizations, the leader must not see them and separate activities, but as hierarchical stages on the path..." (p. 25). Transformational leadership operates at the simplest and deepest level simultaneously and these paradoxes coupled with confusion and conflicts confound both the archer and the transformational target. And yet, a good story, having fun, feeling confident and reflective exercises, in the context of learning English, hit the mark to impart a leadership compass for young women on a transformational path.

A plethora of leadership references and texts as quoted and listed in this paper offer discussions and insights. The standard in this category is *Leadership for Organizations* by Yukl (2001) who characterizes transformational behaviors as, "Idealized Influence; Intellectual Stimulation; Individualized Consideration; and Inspirational Motivation" (p. 278). Yukl's references are helpful for further study on leadership for classrooms or organizations.

### Lady Leaders- An English Communication Class



Prepared and motivated by my leadership studies and the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, the goal was to create an EFL communication class which would develop writing and conversation skills as well as improve students' critical thinking by learning about women in leadership roles (Felder, 1996; Greenleaf, 1977; Krashen, 1982; Krashen, Terrell, 1983; Spears, 1998; Tarvin, Al-Arishi, 1991). The creative curriculum used the contemporary English women's magazines: *Glamour*, *Self*, and *Teen Vogue*; handouts on Lady Leaders; inductive leadership lessons; and interviews with university alumni.

In preparing for the beginning of this class, there was another interesting parallel I found between the opening of a Japanese university and the opening scene in *Mona Lisa Smile*. The beginning of *Mona Lisa Smile* was surprisingly similar to the opening ceremony at a Japanese university. This was a stark contrast to my American university experience which never included an opening ceremony or even acknowledgement, other than a welcome letter with a note to pay your tuition. At a Japanese university it was quite another story. Austere and solemn, the ceremony had invocations, songs,

speeches and a very respectful and quiet audience. In an early scene in *Mona Lisa Smile*, the Wellesley faculty wait formally dressed in their university robes, hoods and academic caps in a large chapel. The Wellesley students are assembled outside as student, Joan Brandwyn played by Julia Stiles, rushes forward. A polished wooden box lined with blue velvet is produced; she takes a wooden mallet out, knocks at the door and hears from inside:

Headmistress    Who knocks at the door of learning?

Brandwyn        I am every woman.

Headmistress    What do you seek?

Brandwyn        To awaken my spirit through hard work and dedicate my life to knowledge.

Headmistress    Then you are welcome. All women who seek to follow you can enter here. I now declare the academic year begun.

Similarly, this class was going to ask the students to knock on the door awakening as we began a transformation into women leaders, or at the very least, a Lady Leader Magazine. Accordingly, first task and challenge for the students was to create an original magazine title as well as a tag-line (slogan) for their Lady Leader Magazine. Students were instructed to combine their ideas about inspiration and women. Titles were required to be under three words. Students were prepared with an interactive lesson which employed titles and tag-lines from well-know companies like McDonald's,



'I'm Lovin' It' and Burger King, 'Have it Your Way' as well as fourteen others. In small groups students discussed possibilities. Then, ideas were shared with the class. Students were able to understand the concept and participate in discussions about marketing inspirations. These insights enabled students to create their own brand of tag-lines. Students appreciated marketing and the power of words exemplified by Nike, 'JUST DO IT'. Tag-lines had to be six

words or less and function in a supporting role to their title by adding inspiration and meaning. Some of the titles- tag lines were, "Imagination- Next Stage; My Way- We Can Be All!; and Sweet Orange- Happy days, happy life".

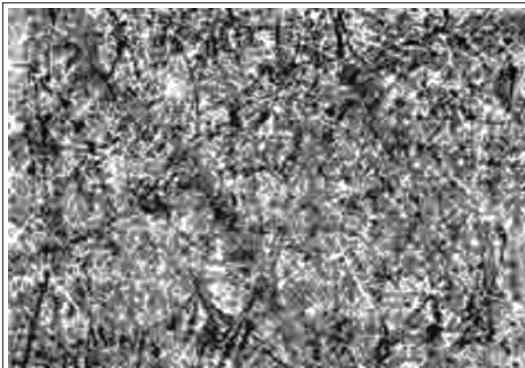
In this first lesson the students created a vision and knocked on the door of leadership. As Tichy (2005) states it is, "...the idealized project that inspire people to move ahead" (p 128). The challenge created and met, the images and words provided a conceptual road map for the students- whether it leads to their future or just to their Lady Leader Magazine, the students are richer for the effort.

Students' interests remained important consideration for their motivation and enjoyment to learn English. Consequently, the Lady Leader Magazine had extensive



sections about everyday life of interest to young female college students. The first section dealt with fashion. Students were asked to consider planning a wardrobe for three occasions. The three categories were, 'Party'; 'Play'; and 'Power'. Students worked together and shared ideas about each category. In each section the students had six pictures and/or illustrations as well as six sentences for a total of eighteen pictures and eighteen sentences. Work was reviewed and students corrected their English. Group discussions gave the students a chance to share their fashion choices. Beyond the fun and enjoyment students clearly exhibited to peruse women's fashion magazines, they had fun sharing their fashion choices while practicing English.

The Lady Leaders Magazine also had sections on health and romance. As in the fashion section, each topic required six photos and six sentences. In the health section students considered and discussed what is needed for a healthy body and mind. An interview with Actress Christina Applegate from *Self Magazine* served as the corner stone of our discussion. Inspired by this article, the Lady Leader Magazine section dubbed 'Six Ways to Wa' (tranquility) discussed aspects of mental strength. This included ideas about making time for yourself with quiet reflection time, using your voice to say what is important, and managing your time well. Since the students are very interested in movie stars, the star power factor sparked their interest. Having gained their attention, students were asked to look beyond the surface and examine the real life stresses a glamorous person faces, which as it turns out aren't so different from the pressures we all face every day. This section served another process to awakening. This is much like the scene in *Mona Lisa Smile* when the students are



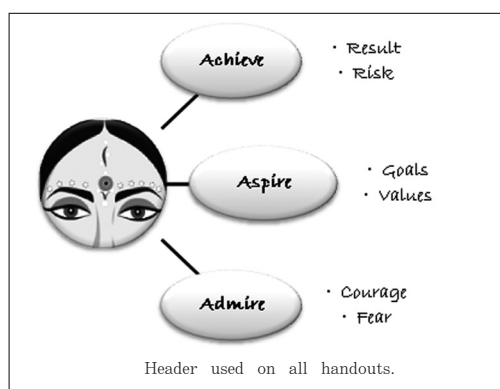
Jackson Pollack, *Lavender Mist*, 1950

asked to look at Jackson Pollock's 1950 huge painting, *Lavender Mist*. Watson tells the students, "Do me a favor, do yourself a favor. Stop talking and look. You're not required to write a paper, you're not even required to like it. You are required to consider it." Similarly, by looking a health through the lens of a movie-star, Christina Applegate, the students were asked to look beyond the beauty and consider what lies past the

surface. Designed to inductively empower, peace of mind found by movie stars or leaders is something far from foreign, rather something within their power. The inductive process is an effective and pervasive mechanism transformation. This process is characterized by an Aristotelian concept where one grasps the universal in the clearly known or particular or epagoge, where, "...by induction that we acquire the knowledge of principles" (APo, 100b3).

In the romance section called 'Partners and Promises' students enjoyed speaking

about the possibilities of love and marriage. Students knew what they wanted in a partner, but when asked what they promise to bring to a relationship, it was a surprise. By considering what qualities they possess and can give, the exercise provided an opportunity for self-reflection. As Spears (2002) says, "Leadership can only occur with regular periods of self-reflection and self-assessment" (p. 123). This consideration and self-reflection are a vital parts of the transformation process.



The crown jewel to the course was women in leadership, or at least content related to the namesake. Women leaders were discussed and written about from three categories. First we assessed achievement in terms of results and risks. Secondly we looked at what these leaders aspired to through their goals and values. Finally, we discussed what we admire in terms of courage and fear. Students were prepared to use these criteria

with an exercise which addressed these issues formatted as personal and rhetorical questions. This inductive approach served to scaffold the concepts into the student lexicon of ideas as well the language used in discussions. The questions related to each concept and the students were asked to write two sentences: First, answer the question and then give your reason. The questions were as follows:

### **Achieve**

What is something you have done you feel good about?

Do you think Mao Asada failed at the Olympics because she missed the gold medal? Why;

### **Aspire**

What is your dream job?

What is the most important quality for a person?;

### **Admire:**

When you're afraid, what do you do?

Who do you like as a person? Why?

After corrections, student re-wrote their sentences and in pairs communicated their ideas to their classmates. The revised copy was put in the Lady Leaders Magazine under the heading "What is a Lady Leader?" These concepts were used throughout the course as the frame from which we would write and discuss the characteristics of the women leaders considered in the class. The assessment redundancy did several things. It allowed the students to become comfortable with the language. It also allowed the students to practice critical thinking and self-reflection as they added each Lady Leader with these concepts to their Lady Leader Magazine.



The women leaders (Lady Leaders) included in this class featured a variety of women in leadership roles. Consequently, the choice of women leaders is flexible and can provide a fresh look for students and educators. What was consistent was how we viewed them. Some of the examples of the women included were: the Virgin Mary representing religion; Murasaki Shikibu representing Japan and the first novelist; Annie Eagar Randolph who was the founder of Kinjo Gakuin; Eleanor Roosevelt for women and children rights; Hillary Rodham Clinton as a modern politician; and Frida Kahlo representing artists.

Through the lens of achievement, aspirations and admiration students learned about what these women leaders did; discussed values and character; and why we can admire them. As a class we developed exemplary sentences. Then students discussed the women leaders in groups. Taking stock of their assets also meant looking at their faults, obstacles and the risks these women took. Again, by making failure not an obstacle, the leap to risk whether trying to speak English or leading a cause, is another a step in the transformational process.



Chaim Soutine, *Carcass*, 1925



Frida Kahlo, *Two Fridas*, 1939

Returning to the leadership metaphors in *Mona Lisa Smile*, a scene from the movie was quite similar to the day students were introduced to Frida Kahlo, a Mexican surrealist painter. In the *Mona Lisa Smile* Watson surprises her students with the image of Soutine's 1925 work, *Carcass*. The students are stunned by the horrific image. This is the first time any have ever been exposed to this genre of painting. In the movie, a student asks, "What's that?" Watson answers, "You tell me. There's no text book telling you what to think. It's not that easy is it? Just look at it again. Look beyond the paint. Let's try to open our minds to a new idea." Similarly, art of Frida Kahlo stunned the EFL students at first. In class a different Kahlo painting was given to groups of three students. Once they learned about her life and times of this political person who withstood horrific personal traumas, some interesting ideas came into view. When asked to share what they thought, what the paintings meant, students were able to tap into the

pain and political messages depicted in the paintings. Kahlo's paintings challenge any viewer. The meanings are not clear, but a kinetic state. When considering the life and art of Frida Kahlo, there are many opportunities to open the mind to new ideas.

Communication and leadership are both personal endeavors, and an important part of the appreciating women in leadership is understanding these choices personally. Addressing this, students were given the opportunity to choose their own Lady Leader. Taking in to account the previous discussions, students prepared the same criteria under the explanations of their choices. Again both written and oral communications were shared. As with all the leaders, six relevant points were made about the leader. Some of the Lady Leaders chosen were Japanese pop singers, actress, historic figures, sport personalities and mothers. Regardless of the leadership criteria, the power of personal choice was in itself an important exercise. And it was true, when asked why they like their particular leader, many said, because she is cute. Others said things like, "She has a strong heart; I admire her hard work; She has a strong will; She believed in herself." Far from failure, learning English or leadership is a process, sometimes the steps may be small, but they're steps none-the-less. As the Japanese say, *hitotsu hitotsu, ippo, ippo*, bit by bit, step by step.

Women leaders have stories to tell. In this process the clarity of the familiar or particular induce revelations to the universal, and in this abstract are available to others. As Denning (2007) states, "Management fads may come and go, but storytelling is a phenomenon that is fundamental to all nations, societies and cultures, and has been so since time immemorial" (p. 5). Storytelling can achieve goals by enabling listeners to visualize universals for the transformations needed to act on that realization. A story can magically serve as the springboard for transformations. Perhaps the best stories the students were from real women, face to face interviews with the university alumni.

Learning communication and leadership are personal, and perhaps there was no better way to convey the value of women than for the students to interview the university alumni. The students prepared and voted on questions for the alumni interviews. These were given to the guests ahead of time. The event was planned by the students and thank you letters were prepared in advanced. Preparing for the end of a project before your begin actually gives one more options and time. This lesson seemed strange to the students at first, but in practice the value imparted another insight into leadership- "...know where you are going when you start" (Yukl, 2001). Thank you cards were prepared except a section where students added a personalized point of interest from the interview. With all in place the interviews were scheduled. The interviews were in Japanese as the alumni's English level was not known. Students translated the answers to the questionnaire and included both the Japanese and English versions in the Lady Leader Magazine. While the students spoke in Japanese for the interview, they developed their English communication skills in the

following ways: they created questions for the interview; translated responses to English; wrote thank you notes; and reported to the class their impressions and benefits from the interview.

Students had a wonderful experience. My greatest hope was that students would gain a sense of who they are and can be as women and as leaders, and be able to articulate this in English. The exercise exceeded my expectations. A sample the students' comments from their thank you notes are as follows:

I thought it was good to enter this school.

I was interested in your life in America.

I was very interested in your Kinjo dignity.

I was very interested in your best memory from Kinjo.

I thought- 'What am I?' I want to be a Kinjo Lady- I can do it!

I like Kinjo much more and I am proud of Kinjo Gakuin forever!

I was very interested in your talk, and I thought- I will study harder.

I'm glad to hear about Christ (Mission) schools and the wonderfulness of Kinjo.

I heard your talk, I remembered my dream and I will study hard again for my dream.

I heard you talk and I decided on the title of my graduation thesis, 'Woman Dignity.'

You said women should have psychological independence- I thought, I have to establish my identity.



Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, 1503

Returning to the one last metaphor from the motion picture *Mona Lisa Smile*, near the end of the movie the students discuss the *Mona Lisa*. At this point Watson listens as the students engaged in a discussion about their ideas. The following is said by the students while looking at a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, "You get all that from just looking at paint on canvas, and it's just her facial expression- what going on underneath her eyes that makes you think. I think it makes it valid and interesting." Another student adds, "The context that it comes from affects the way we view it." And another is heard saying, "I feel I'm missing something." This is the moment when we are witness to the students transformation and the achievement of Watson's leadership. The students are no longer quoting the book but speaking out. They are taking risks by telling what they think or admitting they don't know everything. A similar "ahha" moment happened

following the alumni interviews. Students began to put all the pieces together. They began to consider new ideas and feel the power within themselves.

## Conclusion



There is no lack of wonderful examples of women in leadership roles. What are lacking are courses and text books which celebrate women leaders. This class answers this call. Risks and rewards were shared as students learned about and discussed extraordinary women and shared common everyday interests as they developed their English skills. The students prepared their own magazine guided through a variety of topics including fashion, health, romance, and Lady Leaders. Students were required to write

simple sentences to explain their choices. They developed their speaking abilities using their magazine as reference for in-class and pair-work discussions in each unit. Achievements, aspirations, and admiration of women from the past, present, foreign, and domestic offered an opportunity to tell a story. Students were challenged creatively to make a magazine title, motto, and make a personal choice for a Lady Leader. Higher critical thinking was demonstrated by students' personal assessments as they articulated leadership qualities and their reactions from the alumni interviews. Everyday topics of fashion, make-up, health and romance and extraordinary topics under the guise of women leaders proved to be an enjoyable marriage of lipstick and leadership for this EFL class.

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